

## Learning Wisdom from Paul

- Acts 21:27-22:29
- This will not be a 3-hour sermon, I can assure you. But because we have already read about Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus in chapter 9, and because we will read about it again in chapter 26, we will just hit some of the highlights today.
- We are entering the last ¼ of the book of Luke, which is entirely taken up with the trials of Paul after he is arrested in Jerusalem, and then his travels to Rome after he has appealed to Caesar. While in Jerusalem, he is taken into the custody of the Roman government and remains there until the end of the book. But one thing is clear. **Though he is hated by the Jews and held by the Romans, he is greatly loved and completely upheld by God.** Last week we talked about the meeting Paul had with James, and the concern James had based on a rumor that Paul had been teaching Jews that they could ignore the customs and traditions of their Jewish heritage. People were making claims about Paul's teaching and his ministry and his character that were simply not true. It could have led to a rift between James and Paul, and even between the predominately Gentile church and the predominately Jewish church. By God's grace and through humility, Paul and James did not allow that to happen. It was agreed that Paul would pay for 4 Jewish men to complete their Nazirite vows. He did so the next day and then when the week of his own purification was about up, he was seen in the temple again. Some Jews from Asia were there, saw Paul with some men whom they assumed to be Greeks, and started making a scene. Luke explains that Paul had previously been seen with Trophimus in the city. So the accusation was that Paul brought Greeks into the temple. Many people today would scoff at that and ask, what's the big deal? Is this just a tempest in a teacup? Excavations over the past 150 years have found some of the signs that were posted on the wall in the temple that separated the Court of Israel from the Court of the Gentiles. It read: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." So you see the seriousness of the accusation made against Paul. But it was not true. This leads to my first point.
- **Stating our opinions apart from the facts can sometimes lead to deadly results.**
- We do it every day. State our opinions. Nothing wrong with that, and opinions on any subject are like elbows; nearly everybody has one or two of them. That's fine. Where it is not fine is when we state an opinion as if it is fact when it is not fact. We may think it is a fact but we don't KNOW that it is a fact, but we state it that way anyhow. What's it called when we engage in that activity, sharing an opinion about someone else as if it is fact, saints? Gossip. Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, defines gossip this way: "To gossip means to betray a confidence or to discuss unfavorable personal facts about another person with someone who is not part of the problem or its solution." Laura Schlessinger wrote this: My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted, the more I am believed. I flourish at every level of society. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments, wreck marriages, and ruin careers -- cause sleepless nights, heartaches, and indigestion. I spawn suspicion and generate grief. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. Even my name hisses... I make headlines and headaches. So...before you repeat a story, ask yourself, Is it true? Is it fair? Is it necessary? If not – keep quiet!
- The result of the words that came out of the men's mouths in the temple about Paul were a lot tamer on paper than they were in real life. He was seized and dragged out of the temple. Verse 31: they were seeking to kill him. Don't read that as they were trying to figure out the best way to make him die. No, they immediately started trying to beat him to death. We know that

because when the Roman tribune heard about it and showed up with soldiers and a centurion, “they stopped beating Paul.” (vs. 32) That leads to my second point.

- **Walking in obedience to Christ does not keep us from suffering.**
- In fact, it often leads us right into it. I hope we have all dispelled the nonsense that says if you obey Christ, life will be sweet and easy and always roses, never thorns. No, walking in obedience to Christ often leads us right into suffering. And though God will always deliver us THROUGH, He does not always deliver us from the storm. Exhibit A? Paul.
- Paul is being beaten to a pulp and no one at that moment is going, “Wow, it must be wonderful to be the Apostle Paul. What I wouldn’t do to have HIS job!” But the Romans show up just in time and immediately seize Paul. See that in verse 33? The tribune arrested Paul, and it is the same word that is used in verse 30, where the people seized Paul. They seized him to kill him. The tribune seized him to save his life. It was the best thing that could have happened to Paul, as he was taken into protective custody by the Romans. One aside is that many commentators have made much of what appears to be Luke’s desire to show the reader that it was the Jews who opposed the Gospel and it was the Romans (or, the governing authorities) who protected it. And that the book was written in part to speak to Christians and say, “Submit to the governing authorities. God works through them.” And it was written to say to the Roman empire, which at the time the book was written had started persecuting the church, “You are not acting in a consistent manner with your history.”
- Now for the remainder of the time we have together in the Word this morning, I want to talk about the ways that Paul demonstrated what it means to be as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove. The Romans have him in custody and they are moving him through the mob, but the people are so frenzied in their hatred for Paul that they try to take him away from the Roman soldiers! He had to be picked up and carried by the soldiers as the crowd is screaming, “Away with him!” Does it occur to you that these may be some of the very same people who had screamed the very same thing at the trial of Jesus? As they are screaming, I’m sure Paul is praying, and I am even more certain that the Spirit is moving, and He helps Paul demonstrate wisdom in the following ways.
- **He practiced common courtesy and respect.**
- As the Roman soldiers were about to bring him inside the barracks, Paul asked the leader, “May I say something to you?” It surprised the Roman tribune partly because Paul was speaking Greek to him and he thought Paul was Egyptian. But if he assumed Paul was an assassin or at the very least a bad guy, he must have been shocked that Paul was asking permission to ask a question! Someone said, “Nothing is ever lost by courtesy. It is the cheapest of pleasures, costs nothing, and conveys much.” Paul knew the Scriptures better than anyone. He knew Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
- Then when Paul explains that he is not who the tribune thought he was, he says, “I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” I think the Roman tribune could have been pushed over by a feather at this point, and especially when Paul just motions with his hands to the mob that wanted him dead, and they got quiet! Then Paul starts his speech with, “Brothers and fathers, hear my defense.” What does that greeting take us back to? Who also addressed an angry mob with “Brothers and fathers, hear me”? Stephen! It is a greeting of respect. Here’s one of the ways we can work the works of God: to refuse to answer anger with anger, but instead, when we are disrespected, we choose to show respect anyway. And listen. There is NO way we can do that unless we understand and truly believe that God loves us, and that we are secure in Him, in a way that is unshakeable, and that our position in Christ trumps anything man can attempt to do to us. The better we understand the Gospel and what Christ has done for us, the better we are able to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and do good to those who do evil to us. And saints, listen. You don’t have to be arrested by an angry mob to put this into practice. Start with the angry driver on the highway. Start with your wife, when you feel like you need to protect yourself against her in an argument. Start with your co-worker who really

tends to get on your nerves and you generally are looking for a way to put him in his place. Paul practiced common courtesy and respect. Next,

- **He spoke their language.**
- Notice that Paul speaks Greek to the Roman tribune, which was the best thing he could have done at that point. It helped change the Roman leader's opinion of Paul immediately. Then when Paul is given permission to speak to the mob of angry Jews, he speaks Hebrew, and notes in my Bible say he spoke the Hebrew dialect which may mean he spoke Aramaic. That would have been the common vernacular for them. Notice also that when he does this, the crowd "became even more quiet." What does this mean for us? On a literal level, it means that if possible, we should learn another language. You never know when it might save you from an angry mob. But on a metaphorical level, it means that we work hard to learn how to relate to different people. We learn to adapt to the language and the culture of the person with whom we are relating. Not in a fake way. Jesus was a friend of sinners, but never a hypocrite. He could also have a conversation with Nicodemus, the one he called "the teacher of Israel," and with Herod the King. Paul was the same way. The Holy Spirit can help us do that as well. Again, our security is always in Christ, and we can hold onto that even when we are around people who intimidate us.
- **He built a bridge to his audience. ("This is where I came from.")**
- Paul tells them that he was born a Jew in Tarsus but raised in Jerusalem. That scored points with the crowd. Then he tells them that he was trained by Gamaliel (who would sit on a platform and teach his students who were seated on the ground in front of him, literally at his feet). This scored big points with the intellectuals in the crowd. Then he tells them that he had been a zealot just like them, persecuting the Way even to the death. "Now we're talking, Paul!" He is building a bridge, connecting to this Jewish crowd. Listen, we are much more LIKE the people we are talking to than we will admit. That's where you start. Men, that guy at work that you are praying for but afraid to talk to about Christ likes to watch the NFL as much as you do. Start there. Ladies, that woman in the checkout line that you talk to every time you go through has kids she loves and wants to see them grow up to be successful, just like you do. Start there. But we don't stay there. Because we have another story to tell.
- **He told his conversion story. ("This is what happened to me.")**
- Nine-year-old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School. "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge, and all the people walked across safely. He used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters and call in an air strike. They sent in bombers to blow up the bridge and the Egyptian army, and all the Israelites were saved." "Now, Joey, is that REALLY what your teacher taught you?" his mother asked. "Well, no, Mom, but if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"
- Paul may have wanted to change his conversion story to make it more 'believable,' but he didn't. He told the truth, starting with the fact that his conversion came from heaven. He did not go looking for Jesus, but Jesus came looking for him! He was blinded by a light from heaven, and heard the voice of Jesus from heaven! He called Jesus Lord that day, and then was led by the hand into Damascus where Ananias, "a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews" (vs. 12) came to him and ministered to Paul so that Paul received his sight and also received his commission from God to go and be a witness. Tell everyone what you have seen and heard. Except for the blinding light, isn't that our story as well? We were not looking for Jesus, but He found us in our sins. We met the Lord then and He opened our eyes to the truth of who He is and what he did for us on the cross. We received His commission to go and tell everyone what we have seen and heard. So far so good, Paul. But then it happens.
- **He tells them the truth about the Gospel. ("This is what God says.")**

- Paul tells them about coming back to Jerusalem after he had met Jesus and he says that he went to the temple. By the way, why would he do that if it were true what they were saying, that he was a man against the people, against the law, and against the temple? But when he did come back, Jesus spoke to him in a vision and told him to leave. Why, Lord? "For I will send you far away to the Gentiles." Paul told them the truth. He told them the Gospel, which is that Jesus Christ came to save sinners, Jews AND Gentiles. That's when the crowd turned into a mob again.
- We see Paul again acting with the wisdom of a serpent and the innocence of a dove when they are preparing him to be beaten with a cat-o-nine tails. He appeals to the Roman government to protect him again, as he is a citizen. They do that, but the journey that will lead to his eventual execution has begun. We will follow him into the courtroom of the San Hedrin next week.